

A Note on the Problem of Defining "Art"

Arnold Berleant

Recent attempts at explicating the essential character of art¹ have given rise to discussions concerning the significance of this question for aesthetic theory and to skepticism in some quarters about the very possibility of defining 'art'. While this issues raises numerous difficulties, not the least of these revolves around the nature of the concept 'art' itself. Some (Weitz and Morgan, following Wittgenstein) term it an "open" concept, since its boundaries, by the very nature of an empirical concept, cannot be finally drawn. Others (Kahler) object to this manner of definition, maintaining, instead, that an empirical concept must be defined from its central feature, and that while this feature may be made clear, there will always occur borderline instances that are ambiguous. Still others (Beardsley, Pepper) have attempted to demarcate the aesthetic field so as to arrive at dependable aesthetic criteria.

It might be helpful in dealing with the problem of defining 'art' to look at the concept once more, going, as it were, not from a proposed definition (be it by boundaries or central notion) outward to the phenomena which it may be considered to denote, but from those phenomena commonly considered to exemplify art and from the experiences by which they are known and for which they are sought, inward to the concept. If we were to do this, that is, if we were to approach the problem of concepts, not as hypostatizations, each possessing its distinctive essence or its precise limits, but as conceptual constructs framed by people for the purpose of effectively dealing with their multitudinous similar and diverse experiences, we would come to realize that, apart from formal notions amenable to rigid delimitation, the search for a completely demarcated concept, unequivocal in its denotation, is an *ignis fatuus*, as impossible to attain as it is undesirable to possess.

¹ Cf. Symposium in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XX, 2 (Winter, 1961), 175-198 (Beardsley, Morgan, and Mothersill), and Pepper's comment, "Evaluative Definitions in Art and Their Sanctions," *ibid.*, XXI, 2 (Winter, 1962), 201-208. Also Morris Weitz, "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics," *ibid.*, XV, 1 (September, 1956), 27-35. Reprinted in Weitz's *Problems in Aesthetics* (New York, 1959), pp. 145-156, along with a reply by Erich Kahler, "What is Art?," pp. 157-171.

For concepts are employed and acquire their importance in the ordering of experience previously undifferentiated or indistinct, and the concept 'art' functions in the ordering of the experience of art and the objects which give rise to such experience. If we deal primarily empirically with experiences and not rationalistically with concepts, it takes little insight to recognize that the concept will depend upon the experiences from which it obtains its meaning and to which it refers. Consequently, it will vary in its connotation to the extent that the experiences vary; that is, it 'will be relative to the experiencer and will embody whatever constancy and variability lie in such experiences. Here is an instance in which the genetic account of the functional origin of concepts provides a healthier influence and a more satisfactory explanation than does abstract analysis, by redirecting our consideration back to essentials. Thus it can be seen that the use of the same term is no guarantee of identity of connotation or denotation. Rather, it reveals the poverty of language in attempting communication of a rich variety of experiences with a paucity of verbal means. And no mode of experience surpasses the richness and variety of the aesthetic.

Such an interpretation as this requires a review of our thinking about our conceptual tools. It demands a forthright repudiation of the Platonic-Aristotelian inheritance of completed concepts or ideas, each possessing its own essence. Indeed, it observes that any" discussion of concepts, independently of or in isolation from our experiences, individual and social, is destined to be empty dialectics, perhaps absorbing as a kind of mental acrobatics, but ineffectual or even debilitating for the purpose of sharing experiences. Thus the skepticism of many toward the question of the definition of 'art' is a fitting conclusion to a disjointed inquiry. Let us better admit of a plurality of meanings to encompass a plurality of experiences, having perhaps some things in common (these being expressed in the conventional connotations of terms) , but shading off imperceptibly into experiences inadmissible to some and eventually inadmissible to all. A language of experience is far more appropriate in dealing with experiences than is a language of things. The sooner we repudiate the rationalistic conception of a world of finished objects and turn to that one in which we live and act, the more effectively shall we be able to adapt our thinking and expressing to our experiencing.

The touchstone of all art is thus seen to be aesthetic experience and not a definition. Clearly, the experience of art is prior to its definition. If an object succeeds in evoking aesthetic experience, it, then, in that instance, becomes an aesthetic object. The problem, consequently, resolves into the description and clarification of the *experience* of art. Similarly, the assertion that "evaluations occur by way of definitions"²

² Pepper, *op. cit.*, 203.

raises the question of whether a definition must be a prerequisite for evaluation or whether evaluation follows from the experience of art and then becomes formulated in a justificatory definition. The latter, if it were the case, would not necessarily mean subjectivism in evaluating art. It does insist, however, that art is never art by definition. A rule, in this case a definition, never made a painting or a piece of music beautiful. It is the intellectual, who strives for cognitive apprehension of what he has undergone in an art gallery or concert hall, who seeks to understand, to codify, to systematize and regularize, who may inadvertently discover himself upholding the contrary. Nor is there anything amiss in his cognitive activities, so long as the priority of experience to definition be acknowledged and deferred to.